**Chapter 169: 13th Floor (5)**

Labyrinth ecologists often say this:

Floors like the 13th floor, where only one species of monster exists, were most likely places where various species of monsters were mixed together in the distant past.

People who hear this ask:

Then why does only one monster exist here now?

Labyrinth ecologists answer like this:

“Because they all got eaten!”

**Rumble—**

The fiercely trembling ground urged them to move faster.

The Sand Worm, a colossal worm monster, flexible and smooth, with an unimaginably enormous body, was the one and only monster species on the 13th floor.

Whenever that creature wriggled its body beneath the sand, the ground shook, and the sand supporting their feet began to collapse.

“*Nyah!*”

“*Kyaaak!*”

Cat priest Hitolis and mage Fusilini tumbled across the sandy ground.

Even physically superior Rubia and Jubeel were struggling to keep their balance due to the sand sliding under their feet.

There was only one person who could move right now.

“Lammel! Take care of Nuer!”

“Okay!”

“*Thoo-tata!*”

Leaving Nuer to Lammel, who was laboriously flapping her harpy wings in low-altitude flight, I quickly turned back the way we came.

The sandstorm had crept up to our noses.

*Clang! Clang!*

Sand rattled against my helmet, creating a noisy din, and grains of sand slipped into my eye holes, making me squint.

Even with my vision limited, I activated perception and located the two.

I successfully reached the two who had fallen and grabbed them.

“*Huat*…? M-Mr. Balkan!”

“*Heh…!*”

I tightly fixed the two light-bodied women between my arms, concentrating all my senses on my feet planted firmly in the sand again.

Running at full speed in a vibrating and collapsing desert was no easy task.

A single misstep could twist my ankle, and at any moment, hollow sand could give way, causing me to fall.

But I trusted my senses.

And I had confidence in my body’s performance.

I felt my five senses connect to every muscle in my body.

I focused entirely on the act of running.

Planting my feet steadily on the ground, I ran faster than anyone else.

*Paaang!*

The more I kicked off the sandy ground, the clearer my vision became.

Proof that I was escaping the sandstorm stirred by the Sand Worm—

*Thud!*

“*Guh…!*”

Unexpected pain made me snap my eyes open.

It was a searing, burning pain radiating from my thigh.

I barely managed to keep my balance, avoiding a fall, but my speed slowed significantly.

Turning my gaze, I saw a familiar knife lodged in my thigh.

Perkins. That damn woman’s knife.

“*Kuhahat!* You idiot bastard! Are you so desperate to get eaten in my place!?”

In the distance, I saw Perkins laughing while running away.

A flash of anger surged through my head.

“That bitch!”

Fueled by the determination to take her down, I ignored the pain and tried to run again.

**Rumble rumble rumble!**

The ground vibrated once more.

The sand beneath my feet began to drain rapidly, and sharp teeth started to rise from beneath the sand far away, surrounding the world like a crashing wall.

“*Kuhahat!* I’m safe now! You guys are dead—”

At the moment when Perkins, her face full of delight, sneered at us while climbing the Sand Worm’s teeth—

*Wham!*

“*Guaaargh!!!*”

Rubia charged in with her massive shield, shoving Perkins straight into the Sand Worm’s mouth.

“*Kuhuk, cough, cough! You b—!*”

Perkins, who was mocking us while standing atop the teeth, rolled onto the sand, staring pale-faced as the Sand Worm’s teeth blocked her way forward.

“*You damn it! No! Nooo!!!*”

*Clang! Clang!*

Even as she struck the Sand Worm’s teeth with her knife, the giant monster’s teeth did not budge.

Perkins, overcome with despair, was sucked into the Worm’s stomach along with the sand.

Rubia didn’t even spare her a glance, immediately running back toward us.

“Everyone! Hold onto this girl tightly!”

Her voice was full of certainty.

Now that I think about it, she was also the first to realize the vibrations were caused by the Sand Worm’s movements.

—*Look over there. It’s the armored roll-bun noble girl. The one who survived after being eaten by a Sand Worm!*

Rubia had a history of surviving after being swallowed by the Sand Worm.

Since she had willingly thrown herself into its mouth again, she must have had a plan.

For now, we had no choice but to trust her.

Hitolis, pouring a healing miracle onto my thigh with a pale face, and Fusilini, who had been watching the surroundings, both approached Rubia and grabbed onto her.

I also wrapped my thick arms tightly around her.

“*Huat…!*”

Rubia inhaled sharply, squeezed her eyes shut, and shouted as she gripped her shield tightly.

“Shield to Protect My Lord!”

*Woooong—*

Thick magic burst from Rubia and her massive shield, forming a colossal circular barrier.

*Crunch!*

The Sand Worm’s teeth closed completely.

*Slide—!*

We were sucked straight into the monster’s stomach.

A brown world covered entirely in sand.

Occasionally, horrific scenes passed by.

Limbs floating helplessly, separated from their owners.

Lower bodies, missing torsos, were dragged along by the sand, while upper bodies without legs pounded futilely against the barrier.

Countless corpses that had been swallowed whole by the Sand Worm.

*Swoosh—*

The head of an adventurer, his face twisted in terror as he met his final moments, slid past the barrier.

A red streak of blood smeared across the barrier.

Seeing what could have been our future without Rubia, Fusilini and Hitolis turned pale.

*Crash!*

Every time the sand battered against the barrier, blue magic sparks flew.

Even as the colossal currents of sand swept us along, the ultimate shield Rubia had created endured everything.

“Well done, past me!”

While inwardly praising myself for recruiting Rubia into the party, I simultaneously cursed myself for not taking down Perkins sooner.

*Thunk!*

The barrier touched the sandy floor.

Passing through the violent sand currents and countless floating corpses, we had arrived at a relatively stable place.

“W-What is this place…?”

“Ugh, the smell…!”

A place dark and foul-smelling, much like a sewer.

"That's the colon of the desert worm."

"The colon?"

"…Ah, it's the place where it absorbs moisture from undigested prey and turns it into waste."

"The place where it makes poop?"

"………Th-That’s correct…"

At the straightforward question, Rubia nodded in embarrassment.

“We’ve passed all the dangerous sections! We just went through the digestive sand fluids that melt and break down prey, so now we just have to walk straight ahead!”

Meaning.

"We walk through the colon and come out of the desert worm's butt, right?"

The moment Rubia vigorously nodded her head up and down—

Rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble!

The pink folds covering the world trembled and writhed violently.

Creak, crackle, creak!

The pink colon walls squirmed on all sides, mercilessly crushing the barrier.

“W-What is this?!”

“Eek!”

Fusilini and Hitolis shrieked in horror at the wrinkles pressing against the barrier.

Every time the colon walls pressed against the barrier, its once sturdy, spherical form was squished like sticky rice cake.

“It’s alright!”

Rubia shouted as if to reassure us.

With the colon pressing from above, below, and all sides, even standing space disappeared.

After sticking close to the ground for several minutes, the colon walls finally began to return to their original form.

Inside the now somewhat calm colon, Rubia stood up, brushing the sand off her armored dress.

“Whew…the desert worm’s colon sometimes trembles like this. It could crush us, but as long as I’m here, there’s no problem!”

With one hand covering her mouth, Rubia let out a confident *Oh-hoho!* and pushed out her chest, encased in heavy armor.

Not only was she skilled, but she also possessed extensive knowledge of the labyrinth.

‘This must be why party members are so important the deeper you go.’

Having a reliable shield ahead felt immensely reassuring.

“But the girl’s magic isn’t infinite, so I can’t use *Shield That Protects the Lord* too often.”

*Shield That Protects the Lord.* It seemed to be the name of the barrier she’d just used.

Rubia said this as she tapped the still-active barrier surrounding us.

Even at best estimates, we probably had three or four uses left.

“We’re not dying in a worm’s belly. Let’s get out of here.”

I had no intention of being crushed to death inside a giant worm’s guts.

The idea of hearing, *‘That guy? He died in a worm’s belly, crushed to a pulp,’* was too embarrassing to even think about.

“Balkan, is your thigh okay?”

“Yes, it’s fully healed.”

I nodded at Hitolis’ question.

The leg that had been stabbed by Perkins’s knife was fine now.

What happened to her, I wondered. Did she dissolve and die in the digestive fluids?

I shook off the pointless thought quickly. We had no time to waste.

The colon was taller than my height by two head-lengths and just wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

Because of that, we moved in a single file.

Rubia led the way, clearing the path, Fusilini and Hitolis took the middle, and I brought up the rear, protecting them as we made our way through the dark colon.

Even though I was at the back, my height ensured I could clearly see what was happening up front.

*Squelch! Squelch!*

With Rubia’s barrier gone, the damp sand squelched underfoot, sticking to our greaves.

The foul stench of decaying corpses filled the sand, and every breath carried that disgusting smell into our lungs.

“Ugh, ack–!”

“Hitolis, are you okay?”

“I-I’m fine– Ugh…”

While Rubia, Fusilini, and I, whose sense of smell wasn’t sensitive, managed fine, Hitolis—a cat beastkin—gagged with every step.

But there was no choice. None of us knew magic to block out smell. We could only hold our noses and press forward.

After walking along the subtly writhing colon walls for about two hours, Hitolis, having somewhat adapted to the stench, muttered worriedly.

“Will Jubeel and Lammel be alright? And the others too…”

It was a needless worry. Our situation was the worst of all.

“They’ll be fine. They were out of the desert worm’s range.”

Knowing Jubeel and Lammel, they would have been sure we’d make it out alive the moment Rubia jumped into the worm’s mouth.

“So all we have to do is trust the remaining party members and survive.”

“…Yes!”

At my words, Hitolis nodded with a much calmer expression and looked ahead.

We walked further for a while longer.

Then, far in the distance, a light began to appear.

It wasn’t the white light of the outside world.

It flickered red and blue, like a gas burner flame.

“Huh, the smell…?”

“Sniff, sniff. Huh? It’s fragrant… no, it smells tasty…? What is this?”

On top of that, the stench that had filled the colon disappeared, replaced by a savory smell, like meat cooking.

Not just the smell, either.

*Sizzle–!*

A sound echoed, like meat being seared on a heated frying pan.

*Zap–!*

And then, I sensed a presence entering my detection range.

It was someone I’d met somewhere before.

Quite recently, too.

“…Belle?”

The moment I called the name of the strange girl I’d met on the 5th floor, someone far ahead turned to look at me.

And in the darkness, my eyes met hers—Belle, the girl who had grown familiar in my memory.

“Oh, we meet again.”

Leaning against the colon wall, grilling meat, Belle waved at me.

My gaze shifted to the items at Belle’s feet.

A small frying pan, a blood-soaked knife, a cutting board, flickering flames, and—Perkins thickly sliced into steak portions.